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ABSTRACT

Robert Coles' book "Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians, Children in Crisis" (1977) and Don Barnett's article "Attitudes of Eskimo School Children" (1973) attempt to present needed information on the values of Eskimo children. However, many of their findings are questionable due to poor methodology and interpretation. During summer visits to Alaska, Coles observed 8 Eskimo children and interviewed Native families and village teachers. But, the overwhelming influence of winter on Eskimos' attitudes and feelings can not be understood through a few summer visits. In addition, how Coles was treated, where he stayed, and whom he met must have been affected by the fact that he is a white outsider and a doctor. Coles intellectualized and read into children's behavior to an unacceptable extent. His valid findings are those observations reported without interpretation, such as Eskimo children's pride in their way of life, great interest in the white man's world, and resulting internal conflict; low verbal interaction; quiet and gentle speech; and sociable and cooperative behavior. Barnett also used questionable methods in his survey of the attitudes of 54 Eskimo children, grades 3-8. Questions contained unfamiliar terms and instructions and sophisticated language and gave no consideration to culturally distinct sex roles or possible bias in student responses to an unfamiliar white test-giver. Additionally, Barnett made generalized and sometimes disturbing recommendations, such as the need for teachers to lower their expectations of culturally different students. (SV)

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# A REVIEW OF TWO STUDIES
Concerning
THE VALUES OF ESKIMO CHILDREN

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Robert Coles' book, Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians, Children In Crisis and Don Barnett's article "Attitudes of Eskimo School Children" attempt to present much needed information on the values of Eskimo children. Some of their findings may be valid, but due to the methods used in determining them, many of their conclusions are questionable.

Culture and social class play a large role in determining the values children possess. Research has shown the importance of understanding these values for education to be successful. For learning to occur, the student must be motivated. As Vasquez (1981) explains, "all motivation can be understood through values. No motivation, or hampered motivation, interrupts learning and performance." If a teacher attempts to motivate students with something that is of no value to them, then there is little chance for success. The literature explaining the need for teachers (and the education system) to be aware of the values of the children is quite convincing.

The different ethnic groups have different value systems. Determining accurately what these values are can be very difficult. If misinformation is provided to educators as to the values the students hold, the consequences are not likely to be positive. There are often incidences of values being attributed to certain groups that are simply not

held by them, or they are no longer currently valid. It is doubtful, for example, that very many Hispanics now explain their behavior as Burger (1968) reported, as being due to sorcery and witches.

**Coles' Interpretations**

The one hundred and sixty-six page section on Eskimos in Coles' book is based on his observations of four boys and four girls during his visits to their homes. He spent three summers in Noorvik, Alaska (on the Kobuk River) and at a coastal village. Coles' methods of information gathering involved sitting and talking, drawing and playing with these children, as well as talking with various Native families and village school teachers. He kept notes on his observations and occasionally used a tape recorder.

Coles explains the writing resulting from this method of information gathering as being "in the tradition of the social essay" (p. 59). He observes and interprets what he sees and writes what may or may not be true. It is his reactions and ideas which he makes into a narrative-type of, supposedly, non-fiction. The problem is that it is presented as fact, and undoubtedly generally read as factual material.

Coles writes that he would be the last to deny (or want to deny) the

subjective element in his work (p. 59). It may, though, be a question of integrity and morality when a group of people are diagnosed by an outsider who is not nearly as qualified as he could be and his opinions are published and presented as fact. His book is even used as a text for some university classes. Not all the information he writes is invalid. It is just that the majority of it should not be accepted as reality.

**Questionable Conclusions**

There are several factors that need to be considered when reading Coles' interpetations of these children's behavior. These factors include the length of time and the season in which he did his observing; the fact that he is a Caucasian and a medical doctor; the amount of subjectivity involved and, in at least one instance, that he simply reports information that is incorrect.

It seems that Coles is at least partially aware of the reasons that some of his conclusions and comments should be questioned and accepted cautiously. His observations took place in the summer, and he mentions that "he will never know whether the particularly relaxed, thoughtful, gentle attitude of the children during the summer months was the result

of his familiarity with them or had a great deal to do with the season itself" (p. 51).

I have spent nearly twelve years in areas similar to where Coles did his work, and I can easily confirm that the summer months are short and vastly different than the long winter. The winter time is one of extremes. The area becomes a dark, windy, extremely cold, and remote area of ice. The influence this has on the psychology and behavior of the inhabitants can only be understood by being a part of it.

Coles writes that, during the winter, "the whole world bears down on Eskimo homes, on the villages, for long months of the year" (p. 194). He is not writing this from personal experience. He would have to live there during this time to actually observe the attitudes, feelings, and the results of this environment on the people. They cannot be experienced through brief visits during the winter, let alone just the summer. It takes a day to day, month on month endurance of this very odd and powerful environment to be able to write of it truly. One of the major experiences and influences on these children's lives is not even a part of his study. This is inexcusable since this writing is presented as an accurate portrayal.

It has long been known that anthropologists, those that administer

tests, interviewers and observers, all can have a large effect on whatever subjects are being considered. The manner in which Coles was treated, where he stayed, and the people with which he was involved, had to be affected by the fact that he is a white man and a medical doctor.

Several times he writes of how friendly and kind the Eskimos are, and how they smile at him. Then he explains, too, in another section that an Eskimo "will feel inclined to welcome strangers, however arrogant, and smile at them, no matter what they say or do" (p. 123). He mentions, also, that the Eskimo will agree with a white person, listen to what they say, "say yes, yes, and they keep moving their heads up and down. Later when they are alone, they will laugh and shake their heads back and forth instead of up and down" (p. 120). He writes that Eskimos feel the white people are often "full of themselves and, really, quite ignorant" (p. 118). Why does Coles assume that he is immune to all this? He is a white person, an outsider, and possibly was considered and treated in the very manner he describes above.

Coles intellectualizes and reads into the children's behavior to such a high degree that the reliability is questionable at best. He is somehow able to interpret what the children think and feel. He writes that Eskimo children, even those far up river, "regard the ice and snow around them as

ultimately the ocean's property" (p. 27). Coles explains that while one child was drawing, she was thinking of how "the machine is no match for the world in all its threatening, awesome and occasionally quite beckoning presence" (p. 75). He credits them, too, with "knowing enough to not get hypnotized and fooled by Western industrialism" (p. 75). As a group of children walk towards the river, he interprets it as a "religious procession" (p. 197). He continues by saying that "white people don't know how to thank the wind or smile gratefully at the river" (p. 200).

Are children as conscious and capable of such abstract poetic thought and feeling? Surely he does not intend this to be taken literally What Coles is doing borders on fiction. He appeals to human interest instead of presenting an objective study or anywhere near an accurate picture of this unique group of people. He writes that, "to many white outsiders, the Eskimo has become a romanticized reproof to all other human beings" (p. 223). The most serious error Coles is guilty of is that he perpetuates this notion and further romanticizes the Eskimo people.

Another statement that attempts to present them in a romantic way is one that is simply not true. The fact that he would write incorrect information further makes his portrayal questionable. Coles explains that when the Eskimos drink a lot "they usually don't let loose, show a

truculent, nasty, mean side. They seem as quiet and considerate as ever: still courtly, a touch different, a touch amused at the world's ups and downs... " (p. 205). This is a completely absurd statement to anyone who has been around Eskimos that have drunk a lot. Obviously Coles has never been in such a situation, nor did he attempt to investigate the matter. Close to one hundred per cent of all crimes that Eskimos are involved in are alcohol related. Many of these are quite violent and horrendous crimes. Anyone who has spent very much time at all in the various Eskimo communities in Alaska is aware of the statistics and the degree that alcohol abuse threatens the Eskimo culture.

If someone desires to write about a group of people with honesty and accuracy, with authority and awareness, it is necessary to spend a reasonable time living in that culture. It takes more than a few visits during the summer to provide much valuable information about the Eskimo people.

**Valid Observations**

Coles makes some valid observations. The behavior that he reports without interpreting and attempting to explain, does give some

information that would be of value to teachers. It was made obvious to him that many Eskimo children are very interested in the white man's world. This interest, along with their own pride and way of life, is a source of conflict. Also it is evident to Coles that the Eskimos do not "take issues directly and vocally with outsiders" (p. 119). This often includes the teacher.

Especially important to the classroom is the evident low amount of verbal interaction, "one word can take the place of dozens of sentences" (p. 191). Also it could be observed how Eskimos "do not make a lot of inquiries, not to ask one why or what or how after another" (p. 197). These examples show why lecturing and the question and answer technique may not be the most appropriate teaching strategies.

Another observable behavior that is an important characteristic of the Eskimos is that there is rarely any shouting done. Sharp words are seldom used. Also, the children "rarely play alone, they are not solitary" (p. 210). Their cooperating behavior is obvious to Coles. These are the kind of observations that I have found to be valid and of value to educators.

**Barnett's Study**

The work of Barnett also uses questionable methods to accurately determine the values of Eskimo students. It is a short study that involves only fifty-four Eskimo youngsters in grades three to eight from one community. They were asked to "indicate their attitudes toward a number of words in terms of *liking*, *not liking*, or *it doesn't matter*" (p. 53). They were asked to show their attitudes toward urbanization, white institutions in the village, food, other countries, political leadership, and towards ethnic groups. For example, they were asked to react to a word such as "conservative" and then indicate *like*, *dislike*, or *indifference* to help Barnett determine their attitudes toward political leadership.

One criticism of this study is that it is questionable how well these children comprehended many of the words they were asked to respond to in the test. These children of ages around nine to fourteen lived in a very remote area. Barnett mentions that "no Eskimo from the settlement has achieved beyond eighth grade" (p. 53). I think it is unlikely there would be very much understanding and awareness of world affairs. Many children in suburbia are unfamiliar with terms such as conservative, liberal, or social credit. There is also a high chance there was language interference in the

instructions given on how to take the test.

Another factor that creates doubt in the test reliability is that it was administered by an outsider and a Caucasian. Were their answers chosen to please or anger him? Were they even concerned as to how they responded to the questions? This undoubtedly affected their replies to race questions and items concerning the white establishment in the village.

In the section regarding attitudes toward concepts related to urbanization, they were asked about hunting, guns and sewing. The replies to these items, if the questions were understood, would be greatly affected by the sex of the child. Hunting and guns definitely pertain to the male sex role as does sewing to the female. These items seem to be of little value in determining what is intended.

It is questionable to what extent the students were motivated to respond to these questions with careful consideration. The students possibly had little desire to check boxes on another test. This factor along with no consideration of cultural sex roles, the doubt of how well the students understood the items or the instructions on how to respond, and the fact that the test giver was Caucasian and an outsider, all provide reason for questioning Barnett's conclusions.

**Barnett's Interpretations**

This is a small study and does not warrant a great deal of attention except to question this method of determining values. From the results (which are clearly unreliable) Barnett presents several conclusions. A major implication of his findings is that "a need exists for the school to assert greater positive influence than it is currently doing since only a minority of the children viewed the school favorably" p. 56). This may be true, but the solution is more complex than he suggests. He writes that teachers should lower their expectations of the students because of their "economic and cultural backgrounds" (p. 56). This is *exactly* what angers many Native leaders: teachers using cultural difference, community alcohol abuse, or the standard of living as reasons for having low expectations for their students.

Barnett also suggests that there be more physical education and music classes, and that there are maybe too many rules and regulations in the school. There is a great deal of research that shows more logical, concrete and sohpisticated approaches of how to adapt the educational system to better suit the needs of these children. I do not think that the generalizations he makes, such as suggesting there is an awareness of

nationalistic feeling in these students is warranted by this study. It is a study, though, that at least attempts to provide much needed information.

## In Conclusion

Hopefully other scholars and educators will be encouraged to work at providing more in-depth, reliable findings as to the values of Eskimo children. It is no easy task, but the values that students possess need to be known in order for the educational system to be more successful. This paper mentions two studies that are concerned with the values of Eskimo children, and it attempts to show that the methods used in identifying them and their interpretations are questionable. Both studies possibly do make some valid points, but better, more objective and reliable studies are needed so teachers can better educate these unique children. It is not clear if parental pressure or praise, grades, learning for its own sake, the characteristics of the teacher, or just what factors are able to best motivate Eskimo students to want to learn in the classroom.

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